

Beenash Jafri, "Ongoing Colonial Violence in Settler States," *Lateral* 6.1 (2017).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L6.1.7>

This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Forum: Emergent Critical Analytics for Alternative Humanities

Issue 6.1 (Spring 2017)

Settler Colonialism

Ongoing Colonial Violence in Settler States

Beenash Jafri

ABSTRACT Response to J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, "A Structure, Not an Event: Settler Colonialism and Enduring Indigeneity," published in *Lateral* 5.1. Jafri articulates how a critical race feminist/queer lens makes possible thinking that sees the repetitions of racialized, gendered, sexualized colonial violence.

In this post, I extend J. Kēhaulani Kauanui's incisive *Lateral* essay on the analytic of settler colonialism. Kauanui's discussion underscores implications of understanding settler colonialism as a structure, rather than an event, while insisting on the centrality of indigeneity to discussions of settler colonialism.¹ In line with that discussion, I reflect here on my own introduction to, and relationship with, settler colonial studies, offering an alternate trajectory and context for this work that makes visible some of the distinct stakes for those of us who are engaged in queer/feminist of color and decolonizing research and activism. I outline some of the distinctions between early work on ongoing colonialism by critical race and Native feminist scholars that preceded the institutionalized formation of settler colonial studies, while also distinguishing both of these from the approaches found in Indigenous Studies. For fellow scholars engaged in settler colonial studies, I emphasize the significance of developing scholarship that is invested in addressing entangled forms of racialized and colonial violence, rather than reproducing fields or disciplines.

When I began a project on coalition building between Indigenous peoples and people of color as an MA student in Canada in 2005, "settler colonial studies" was not yet established as a field. However, I was able to draw on the work of scholars such as Bonita Lawrence, Enakshi Dua, Sherene Razack, Patricia Monture and Lee Maracle to speak of ongoing colonial violence in white settler societies. Maracle's *I Am Woman* develops an early Native feminist framework through an account of everyday colonialism and its gendered intersections; Monture's *Journeying Forward* presents a critique of the notion of self-determination, arguing instead for the independence of First Nations; Lawrence's *Real Indian and Others* situates the tensions surrounding "mixed-blood" Natives in terms of the Canadian Indian Act, which regulates Indigenous identity and access to treaty rights; Lawrence's highly provocative essay, co-written with Enakshi Dua, "Decolonizing Antiracism," argues that theories of race, diaspora, and postcoloniality, along with antiracism activism, reproduce the colonial discourses and ideologies of settler states; Razack's edited collection, *Race, Space and the Law* draws on critical race and gender studies to examine the spatial violence of white settler societies.² Maracle and Monture do not use the language of "settlers," "settler-colonials," or "settler state." Razack, Lawrence, and Dua use these terms primarily to describe the patterns of capitalist development that are particular to the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand: White settlement of these lands required the erasure and displacement of Indigenous peoples

and claims to land, and the exploitation of labor of people of color to develop that land.³ Though Lawrence, Dua, and Razack respectively speak of colonization as being upheld and supported by settler states, they also implicitly make a subtle distinction between the settler state and colonization: the settler state had colonizing imperatives that were historically and geographically specific—because colonization facilitated settlement—but those colonizing imperatives were not necessarily identified as a unique form of colonization. Take, for example, Razack’s definition of a white settler society, from the introduction to her 2002 edited collection, *Race, Space, and the Law*:

A white settler society is one established by Europeans on non-European soil. Its origins lie in the dispossession and near extermination of Indigenous populations by the conquering Europeans. As it evolves, a white settler society continues to be structured by a racial hierarchy. In the national mythologies of such societies, it is believed that white people came first and that it is they who principally developed the land; Aboriginal peoples are presumed to be mostly dead or assimilated. European settlers thus *become* the original inhabitants and the group most entitled to the fruits of citizenship. A quintessential feature of white settler mythologies is, therefore, the disavowal of conquest, genocide, slavery, and the exploitation of the labour of peoples of colour. In North America, it is still the case that European conquest and colonization are often denied, largely through the fantasy that North America was peacefully settled and not colonized.⁴

Though her definition flattens some of the distinct histories of the US and Canada—including the differences in nation and state formation resulting from an economy organized through chattel slavery in the US—Razack importantly centralizes the violence of conquest, and its subsequent disavowals, in this definition of a white settler society. For her, what characterizes this society is not that colonialism is “a structure, not an event,”⁵ but that colonialism is the continued repetition of colonial violence, or of the colonizer/colonized relationship. In the same edited collection, Razack’s essay on the murder of Saulteaux woman Pamela George exemplifies this approach as she argues how both the murder and subsequent trial discursively and materially repeated and affirmed colonial violence.⁶









When settler colonial studies became institutionalized through Lorenzo Veracini’s introductory text, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (2010), and the inaugural issue of *Settler Colonial Studies* (2011), I simultaneously excited at the generative possibilities this work opened up for supporting the work I was already doing, and perplexed by the “newness” and seemingly sudden declarations of the contours of the field, given that my primary points of engagement were located in critical race and Indigenous Studies.⁷ I had begun this work with a clear premise: that colonization is ongoing. Subsequently, the questions framing my work included: What does ongoing colonization look like? How does it manifest? How do particular institutions, discourses, ideologies, and groups perpetuate colonization? This was a very different project than, say, describing what settler colonialism looked like. The starting point was that the violence affecting Indigenous peoples was historically constituted and perpetuated by legal and cultural discourses. The intellectual, political, and ethical commitments were to confront that violence, rather than to better understand settler colonialism per se. At the same time, the establishment of settler colonial studies also meant that I could spend less time “proving” that colonization was happening in settler states, because the field created a framework that clearly laid out its parameters. In particular, Patrick Wolfe’s conceptualization of settler colonialism as “a structure, not an event” premised on “the elimination of the Native” enabled me to support the contention that colonization is ongoing.⁸

Retrospectively, however, I believe there is a qualitative difference between arguing that colonization is ongoing, and arguing that colonization is a structure, even as the two may be intertwined. The former gestures to repetition of an originary violence, emphasizing the continual reenactment of colonization, whereas the latter emphasizes the totalizing effects of originary violence, emphasizing colonization's erasures. To be sure, remembrance and erasure have a dialectical relationship with one another. Yet, there are political-ethical implications to highlighting one over the other. For example, engaging colonization as ongoing generates possibilities for focusing on colonial violence and its intersectional entanglements with racialized, gendered, and sexualized exclusion and exploitation, as exemplified by scholars working on settler colonialism through the lenses of women of color feminism, black feminism, queer of color critique, and critical race and ethnic studies.² In particular, underscoring the repetition of colonial violence enables (even if it does not guarantee) the centering of Indigenous peoples—who are still here, and still resisting colonialism—while drawing attention to *experiences* of violence and their embodiment through categories of difference such as race, gender, and sexuality, as well as their connections to land. To return to Razack—her analysis of the Pamela George case elucidates that colonial violence in settler societies happens again and again, with the support of social institutions and discourses. Framing that violence as an intrinsic or established feature of settler societies implies that it has been embedded in a structure that simply replicates itself. Razack's framing suggests that the violence is active and dynamic—allowing for the possibility of intervention and transformation—whereas framing colonial violence as an intrinsic component of settler societies suggests that the violence is *always already there*, thus limiting, even if not foreclosing, transformative possibilities. I think here too of Tiffany King's essay "New World Grammars" (2016), which emphasizes colonialism as *conquest* rather than as settled structure in order to foreground the encounters with violence that subsequently form the basis for Black and Native relationality.¹⁰ King's essay is included in the Fall 2016 *Theory and Event* special issue "On Colonial Unknowing," edited by Manu Vimalassery, Juliana Hu Pegues, and Alyosha Goldstein, which insists on the indispensability of "postcolonial feminist theory, critical disability studies, queer theory, and women of color feminism" for undoing the disavowal of colonial relations that characterizes white settler societies.¹¹ In their introduction to the special issue, Vimalassery, Pegues, and Goldstein posit that the over-emphasis on settler colonialism as structure unwittingly obscures settler colonialism's historicity, or the ways in which it operates and has operated as event, and in conjunction with other modes of power.¹²

At the same time, both settler colonial studies and critical race feminist/queer approaches are "top down" insofar as they take as their point of departure colonizers/colonial violence. This is markedly different from Indigenous Studies approaches, which investigate how Indigenous peoples negotiate, contest, and resist colonial power. For instance, two recent, major works in the field, Audra Simpson's *Mohawk Interruptus* and Glen Coulthard's *Red Skin, White Masks*, have as their core focus Indigenous expressions of sovereignty and decolonization in settler colonial contexts.¹³ As Kauanui makes clear in her *Lateral* essay, "any meaningful engagement with theories of settler colonialism—whether Wolfe's or others'—necessarily needs to tend to the question of indigeneity. Settler Colonial Studies does not, should not, and cannot replace Indigenous Studies."¹⁴ While both settler colonial studies and critical race feminist/queer approaches offer generative insights into the workings of colonial power, those of us working from these approaches need to be mindful of these distinctions and how they position us differently with respect to questions of decolonization. Investigations of settler colonialism may inadvertently center non-Natives and reproduce colonial violence if not attentive to Indigenous voices, struggles, and perspectives. Professional academic expectations that

prioritize the reproduction of disciplinary (or interdisciplinary) methods over political critique facilitate this centering of non-Natives. In my own work, I strive, usually imperfectly, to counter this tendency by thinking and working in an anti-disciplinary mode. In my current project—which engages with diasporic film’s relationships to settler colonialism—this means refusing to remain faithful to disciplinary demands of ethnic, gender, film, or settler colonial studies if and when they reproduce epistemic violence. Politically motivated and grounded work must be invested not in reproducing fields and disciplines, but in engaging in intellectual work to the extent that it facilitates social transformation.

Notes

1. J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, “‘A Structure Not an Event’: Settler Colonialism and Enduring Indigeneity,” *Lateral* 5, no. 1 (2016), <http://csalateral.org/issue/5-1/forum-alt-humanities-settler-colonialism-enduring-indigeneity-kauanui/>. 
2. Lee Maracle, *I Am Woman: A Native Feminist Perspective on Sociology* (Vancouver: Press Gang, 1996); Patricia Monture, *Journeying Forward: Dreaming First Nations’ Independence* (Halifax: Fernwood, 1999); Bonita Lawrence, “Real Indians” and Others: *Mixed-Blood Urban Native Peoples and Indigenous Nationhood* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004); Bonita Lawrence and Enakshi Dua, “Decolonizing Antiracism,” *Social Justice* 32, no.4 (2005): 120-143; Sherene Razack, ed., *Race, Space, and the Law: Unmapping a White Settler Society* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2002). 
3. Lawrence, “Real Indians” and Others; Lawrence and Dua, “Decolonizing Antiracism”; Razack, ed., *Race, Space, and the Law*. 
4. Razack, “Introduction: When Place Becomes Race,” *Race, Space, and the Law*, 1–2; emphasis in original. 
5. Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 388–389. 
6. In more recent work, Razack cites Wolfe’s work—specifically his argument concerning the logic of elimination as foundational to settler colonialism—but her emphasis remains on the repetition of colonial violence. See Sherene Razack, *Dying from Improvement: Inquest and Inquiries into Indigenous Deaths in Custody* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015). 
7. Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (New York: Palgrave, 2010). 
8. Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” 388–389. 
9. For instance, see Iyko Day, *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Rita Dhamoon, “A Feminist Approach to Decolonizing Anti-Racism: Rethinking Transnationalism, Intersectionality, and Settler Colonialism,” *Feral Feminisms* 4 (Summer 2015): 20–37; Candace Fujikane and Jonathan Y. Okamura, eds., *Asian Settler Colonialism: From Local Governance to the Habits of Everyday Life in Hawai’i* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2008); Shona Jackson, *Creole Indigeneity: Between Myth and Nation in the Caribbean* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Tiffany Lethabo King, “The Labor of (Re)reading Plantation Landscapes Fungible(ly),” *Antipode* 48, no. 4 (2016): 1022–1039; Ruthann Lee, “Portraits of (Un)Settlement: Troubling Multicultural Masculinities in Dominique Hui’s *Quiet North* and Kent Monkman’s *Shooting Geronimo*,” *GLQ* 21, no. 4 (2015): 459–499; Shaista Patel, Ghaida Moussa, and Nishant Upadhyay, “Complicities, Connections, & Struggles: Critical Transnational Feminist Analysis of Settler Colonialism,” *Feral Feminisms* 4 (Summer 2015): 5–19; Juliana Hu Pegues, “Rethinking Relations:

- Interracial Intimacies of Asian Men and Native Women in Alaskan Canneries," *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 15, no. 1 (2013): 55–66; Malissa Phung, "Are People of Colour Settlers Too?" *Cultivating Canada: Reconciliation through the Lens of Cultural Diversity*, eds. Ashok Mathur, Jonathan Dewar and Mike DeGagne (Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2011), 289–298; Robinder Kaur Sehdev, "Lessons From the Bridge: On the Possibilities of Anti-Racist Feminist Alliances in Indigenous Spaces," in *This is an Honour Song: Twenty Years Since the Blockades—An Anthology of Writing on the "Oka Crisis"*, ed. Leanne Simpson and Kiera L. Ladner (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2010), 105–123; TJ Tallie, "Queering Natal: Settler Logics and the Disruptive Challenge of Zulu Polygamy," *GLQ* 19, no. 2 (2013): 167–189; Rita Wong, "Decolonizasian: Reading Asian and First Nations Relations in Literature," *Canadian Literature* 199 (Winter 2008): 158–180. [↗](#)
10. Tiffany Lethabo King, "New World Grammars: The 'Unthought' Black Discourses of Conquest," *Theory and Event* 19, no. 4 (2016). [↗](#)
 11. Manu Vimalassery, Juliana Hu Pegues, and Alyosha Goldstein, "Introduction: On Colonial Unknowing," *Theory and Event* 19, no. 4 (2016). [↗](#)
 12. Vimalassery, Pegues, and Goldstein, "Introduction." [↗](#)
 13. Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014). [↗](#)
 14. Kauanui, "A Structure Not an Event." [↗](#)

[Bio](#)



Beenash Jafri

Beenash Jafri is a Visiting Assistant Professor of American Studies & Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies at UC Davis. Her research engages critical race, Indigenous, settler colonial and gender and sexuality studies through film and cultural criticism. She has published essays in *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, *Cultural Studies-Critical Methodologies*, and *Critical Race and Whiteness Studies*, and is currently preparing a manuscript entitled *Diasporic Cowboys: Cinematic Entanglements of Race and Settler Colonialism*.

